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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5553

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 000369

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2019

TAGS: PHUM PREL PREF IN CH

SUBJECT: DALAI LAMA SUCCESSION SPECULATION: MARCH 10

ANNIVERSARY PRODS TIBETANS TO CONTEMPLATE INTERNAL

DIVISIONS AND LOOK FORWARD

REF: A. (A) BEIJING 00419

1B. (B) NEW DELHI 03002

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Steven White for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

11. (C) Summary. The February 25 Tibetan New Year (Losar) marks the beginning of a tense three-week prelude to March 10, the 50th anniversary of the failed 1959 uprising that led the Dalai Lama to flee China. Tibetan exiles in India have followed the lead of their compatriots in China and shunned traditional Losar celebrations, uniting the two groups in a "shared disdain for the PRC." But, unity between Tibetans inside China and the exiles in India on how best to highlight the Tibet issue has generally been elusive, as the "theatrical protests" of the exiles have failed to resonate in Tibet. "Gesture politics" such as hunger strikes and long-distance marches organized by the powerful, pro-independence Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) and other exile groups will likely feature during the March 10 anniversary. According to contacts, although these protests will be peaceful, protesters may "spontaneously" congregate at the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi to garner greater media attention. The 50th anniversary has also amplified dialogue on succession scenarios for the Dalai Lama, with the Karmapa as a leading contender for "regent" to oversee the selection process. Lamas and academics caution against simplifying the succession issue, noting that divisions between the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism should not be underestimated. End Summary.

"Nothing to Celebrate"

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12. (C) Tibetan New Year (Losar) began on February 25 this year and by all accounts it was a somber time for Tibetans in and out of Tibet. The Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) President Tsewang Rigzin told Poloff the organization followed the lead of their brethren inside Tibet and boycotted traditional New Year celebrations, instead marking the occasion as the end of a "black year" with a 50-hour hunger strike in Dharamsala. Karma Yeshi, Editor-in-Chief of Voice of Tibet, the Dharamsala-based radio station that broadcasts in Tibetan and Chinese languages, commented that the "black" Losar has dominated the station's airwaves. While the government-in-exile, the Central Tibetan Authority (CTA), has not provided formal guidance on a subdued Losar, Tibetan contacts across India confirmed they have joined the boycott. Even religious communities will forego celebrations; Lama Lekshey, Director of the Sakya Center and Nunnery in Dehradun noted his monastery will only perform the traditional New Year spiritual rituals without the usual pomp. Tibetan contacts worry the PRC's attempts to force Tibetans to celebrate this week could backfire and increase tensions (Ref A). Columbia University Professor and noted Tibetan expert Robert Barnett noted that the Tibetan New Year's boycott has

been a "hugely successful strategy" in unifying both Tibetans from the Eastern and Central plateau, as well as exiles and Tibetans living in China in a "shared sense of disdain for the PRC and the Communist party."

TYC's "Gesture Politics"

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13. (C) Dr. Barnett commented that "for a change, the TYC's support is not theatrical," as it took a cue from the "more sophisticated" strategy of Tibetans inside Tibet. He worries that the TYC's more outrageous tactics in the past have alienated both new arrivals from Tibet and a potential Chinese audience. Barnett theorized that Tibetans raised within the Indian political culture view politics as an exercise in sacrifice and proving one's devotion to the cause. This "politics of gesture" manifests itself in hunger strikes and long-distance marches, but rarely finds a concrete strategy for moving forward. Poloffs have observed that TYC officials are unable to clarify their strategy for independence. Contacts note that TYC tactics even disturb the Dalai Lama and leave Westerners puzzled. Barnett criticized the TYC for relying on short-lived media buzz as a long-term strategy for the movement. Contacts have confided that the Dalai Lama's Special Envoy Lodi Gyari observed such exiles are often "blissfully unaware" of the real concerns faced by Tibetans inside Tibet. Consequently, several years ago Gyari changed strategy to focus on China as the "India-based movement is a drag upon them (the CTA)."

14. (C) Reliable human rights contact Ravi Nair counters that although the TYC leadership lacks political savvy, the

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group's sheer numbers and organizational network pose a real challenge to the Chinese. He theorized that Lodi Gyari "hoisted" the current, more moderate TYC President, American citizen Tsewang Rigzin, onto the organization's helm to "make sure TYC did not step too far out of line." Nair asserted the TYC's protests in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics "embarrassed" Gyari and other CTA officials in the inner circle, especially when TYC defied CTA's instructions to rein in its activities.

March Predictions

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15. (C) Predictions of Tibetan contacts vary widely on how Tibetans inside Tibet will react to March 10, the 50th anniversary of the 1959 uprising and the Dalai Lama's flight to India. Dr. Barnett warned that the PRC "Strike Hard" campaign has already increased tensions and he fears the Chinese will overreact, sparking a crisis. Given the heavy military presence in Tibet, he predicts that the few isolated protests that may arise will be crushed instantly. TYC President Rigzin told Poloff "people are frustrated and angry; they want to do something;" however, he admits that protest is impossible given the current tight security in Tibetan areas of China. Both the Dalai Lama and the Kashag, the Tibetan cabinet-in-exile, released appeals to Tibetans to exercise patience during the anniversary period and refrain from protesting. Tibetan Solidarity Committee spokesperson Tashi Dhondup, believes that "99 percent of Tibetans will listen; they are helpless and harmless," although he worries about the "other one percent who have a total disregard for life."

16. (C) According to the Dalai Lama's Representative Tempa Tsering, the CTA will mark the 50th anniversary with events during the final week of March to thank India for its generosity. TYC President Rigzin told Poloff the organization also plans to thank its host country and organize a conference which looks to Tibet's future with a focus on environmental issues. Rigzin confided the TYC, s hopes that former Vice President Al Gore will speak at the event. TYC VP Dorjee added the organization will highlight

positive aspects that developed during 50 years in exile, such as democratic reforms. Both Rigzin and Dorjee will be outside India on March 10 (in Brussels and New York respectively), meaning the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi may be off the "storming list" this year. However, Dorjee divulged that if the traditional hunger strikes and peace marches fail to attract substantial media attention, some protesters "may become desperate" and "spontaneously" congregate at the Chinese Embassy. Such protests will not be limited to TYC, as Tashi Dhondup observed Tibetans will take advantage of their relative freedom in India to protest peacefully.

The "Obama Lama" - Succession Speculation

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¶17. (C) According to many sources present at the November 2008 emergency conclave on the future of the Tibetan movement (Ref B), Prime Minister-in-Exile Samdhong Rinpoche mentioned that religious leaders are considering the possibility of appointing a regent to oversee the succession of the 73 year-old Dalai Lama until his reincarnation is identified. One leading candidate is the head of the Kagyu school of Buddhism: the Seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje. Contacts have nicknamed this 24-year-old, the "Obama Lama," because he is an inspiring, fresh face on the Tibetan scene who speaks Tibetan, English, and Chinese. (Comment: Both the New York Times and Newsweek have published favorable articles on the Karmapa, who seems comfortable in the media spotlight. These stories and other articles published in the Western media have largely oversimplified the Karmapa as an easy solution to the regent debate. End Comment.)

¶18. (C) Poloff's contacts give the Karmapa high marks as an embodiment of the Tibetan struggle. Born in Eastern Tibet, he fled China in 1999 at the age of 14 and has been recognized by both Tibetan and Chinese leadership as the true Karmapa. Moreover, the Dalai Lama has reached out to the younger leader. Spokesperson Tashi Dhondup remarked "the Karmapa has seen Tibet, he has seen the Chinese...he has remarkable insight into the movement's past, present, and future." Turnout at the Karmapa's annual January teaching in the Indian state of Bihar was impressive and his following is growing. The TYC supports the choice of the Karmapa as a charismatic regent who could continue to promote the Tibetan

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struggle on the international stage. TYC President Rigzin advised the Dalai Lama to begin traveling with the Karmapa now to increase his exposure to foreign leaders and visibility in the media.

¶19. (C) This is not the first time regent rumors have circulated within the Tibetan community. Director of the Sakya Center Lama Lekshey recounted that in the early 1990s, the Dalai Lama made a controversial announcement regarding his desire to appoint "a number two:" a second in command of the Tibetan community's secular and spiritual affairs who could immediately succeed him if necessary. The Dalai Lama called a conference to discuss the matter, despite overwhelming opposition to the proposition. However, after Sakya Ngawang Kunga Theckchen, the leader of another sect and a front runner for the "number two" position requested exclusion of his name from the list of contenders, the Dalai Lama decided there was not a suitable person for the position at the time and canceled the conference.

¶10. (C) Contacts advised Poloff the succession question cannot be simplified, observing there is no precedence for the present situation and vulnerability of the Tibetan community. There are four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug. The Dalai Lama comes from the Gelug school, while the Karmapa comes from the Kagyu school; Buddhist leaders told Poloff they are unsure if the regent could belong to a different school. Dr. Barnett underlines that "each school has its own interest including

tens of thousands of monks." He compliments the Dalai Lama's alliance with the Karmapa, but warns that replicating this alliance institutionally will pose a challenge. Ravi Nair expects "total chaos" to erupt once the Dalai Lama passes away. He warned that only the strength of the Dalai Lama's personality has controlled the simmering tensions within the Tibetan community. Nair argued that the Karmapa cannot become regent as the larger and more powerful Gelugpa sect would never allow it. He postulated that the more realistic option would be a counsel of regents, including the Karmapa, a representative from the Dalai Lama's sect, the current PM-in-exile, and Lodi Gyari. L.A. Times reporter and Tibet hand Mark Magnier speculated that the Dalai Lama would try to divide his secular and spiritual responsibilities for his successor; however, "this won't be easy."

¶11. (C) At the November conclave, the PM-in-exile assured Lama Lekshey that the CTA has taken the succession issue under consideration. Contacts reported that the heads of the four religious schools will meet from March 6 to 8 in Dharamsala. Such speculation does not ease fears for the TYC's Dorjee who worries that in the absence of the Dalai Lama, the historical differences between Tibetans will reemerge and divide the community. Other sources warn the Tibetans must formulate a succession strategy since "the Chinese already have their plans."

Comment

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¶12. (C) Tibetan and non-Tibetan contacts agree the succession of the Dalai Lama cannot strictly follow historical precedents, as this could mean a twenty-year leadership gap while the Dalai Lama's reincarnation is identified and educated. Tibetans realize they cannot afford this vulnerability vis-a-vis the Chinese during a crucial period for the movement; however, no official strategy has been announced. The succession debate will likely continue to be muted and disorganized within the Tibetan exile community as Tibetans understandably prefer not to face the Dalai Lama's eventual mortality. End Comment.

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